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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 001532

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FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFATT

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SUBJECT: SIXTH ROUND OF SA'ADA FIGHTING INTENSIFIES

REF: SANAA 1507

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY. The sixth round of fighting between the ROYG and the Houthis, which began on August 11, has continued to escalate, kinetically and rhetorically. On August 13, the ROYG gave the Houthis six conditions for ceasing hostilities, including one that the Houthis most likely have no power to meet ) clarifying the circumstances surrounding the kidnapping of Westerners in Sa'ada in June. The Houthis rejected the six conditions, calling instead for the ROYG to abide by the Doha Agreement. The humanitarian situation has also worsened, as the Houthis have blocked key roads and the ROYG has blocked mobile phone telecommunications within Sa'ada, making the situation on the ground even harder to ascertain. The ROYG still appears intent on striking with an iron fist and has not seriously explored any non-military solutions. END SUMMARY.

FIGHTING INTENSIFIES  
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¶2. (C) The sixth round of fighting between the ROYG and the Houthis, which began on August 11 (reftel), has continued to escalate, spreading as far as Harf Sufyan (Amran governorate). Khalid al-Mulad, Country Director for Islamic Relief (which has seven staff on the ground in Sa'ada City), told PolOff on August 17 that "this time, the fighting is nastier." On August 13, Houthi news outlet Almenpar.net reported that the Houthis had taken control of al-Manzalah, Qamamah, and Talan, all of which are strategic areas close to the Saudi border; the Houthis also besieged al-Kamp, one of the First Armored Division's most important posts. The Houthis also reported on August 13 that the ROYG used white phosphorus in an attack against Marran, "just as Israel bombarded Gaza." On August 14, the ROYG claimed that Houthis kidnapped 15 Red Crescent volunteers from an IDP camp; the Houthis denied the charges. ICRC Delegation Head Jean-Nicolas Marti told PolOff on August 16 that all 15 volunteers had been released and returned safely to their families, but he would not comment on the circumstances of their kidnapping. ROYG artillery and airstrikes continued on August 15 and 16. The new fighting in Amran centered in Harf Sufyan district, on the border with Sa'ada governorate, about 37 miles (60 km) south of Sa'ada City and 75 miles (120 km) north of Sana'a. An unnamed official from Amran governorate was quoted in AFP saying that fighting in that area resulted in the deaths of 17 rebels and six soldiers. Mohammed Azzan, presidential advisor for Sa'ada affairs and a founding member of the Believing Youth, told PolOff on August 16 that "strikes are happening as we speak" in the sparsely populated districts of Dahyan and Madra in Sa'ada, as well as Harf Sufyan. He said that artillery strikes generally occur during the daytime, while aerial strikes occur at night.

13. (C) Despite Iranian and Houthi media reports alleging that Saudi Arabia had become directly involved in the conflict, that does not appear to be the case. Fighting has reached several areas close to the border, specifically al-Shaniq and al-Hasama, but there are no credible reports of fighting within Saudi territory. (Note: Although paragraph four of reftel reported that fighting had spilled across the Saudi border, Post subsequently confirmed that was not the case. End Note.) The Iranian press quoted anonymous sources that the Saudi government conducted airstrikes against the Houthis, but these allegations lack credibility. Azzan dismissed them, saying, "There is no truth to the allegations that the Saudis are involved ) and no need for them to be." He explained that the ROYG does not need Saudi air support because there is a Yemeni air base in nearby Abs (Hajja governorate).

#### ROYG ANNOUNCES SIX CONDITIONS FOR A CEASEFIRE

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14. (U) On August 13, the ROYG's Supreme Security Committee demanded the Houthis meet six conditions in order to negotiate a ceasefire: 1) withdraw from all mountains, fortifications, and districts of Sa'ada; 2) remove all checkpoints; 3) cease all acts of banditry and destruction; 4) return all seized military and civilian equipment; 5) clarify the situation of the six kidnapped foreigners, "as information indicates the Houthis are responsible," and release all kidnapping victims; and 6) refrain from intervening in the affairs of local authorities. Mohammed Abd-al-Salam, Houthi media spokesman, appeared on Al Jazeera on August 13 criticizing the conditions because they ignore

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the Doha Agreement, "do not propose a comprehensive solution to the Sa'ada crisis in a way that ensures it will not re-emerge," and "promote lies and fabrications about the issue of the abductees." He continued, "We categorically refuse any link between the case of the abductees and the Sa'ada crisis." The ROYG, however, appears to have abandoned its commitment to the Doha Agreement, believing that it gave the Houthis enough room to breathe that they were able to expand their control into other areas. (Note: Terms of the Doha Agreement, signed by the ROYG and the Houthis in February 2008, included a halt to all military operations, the release of all prisoners within a month, exile to Qatar of two rebel leaders, and the establishment of reconstruction and compensation committees. End Note.)

#### ESCALATING RHETORIC

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15. (C) Both the ROYG and the Houthis have escalated rhetorical attacks against each other. The Houthis are comparing the ROYG's alleged use of white phosphorus to Israel's attacks against civilians in Gaza. The Friday sermons at government-controlled mosques on August 14 blamed the Houthis for the violence and killing of innocents. In an August 15 meeting with the Ambassador, Ministry of Defense Chief of Staff General Mohammed al-Ashwal claimed that armed forces had "fully respected the ceasefire" while the rebels "used civilians as human shields." Ashwal dismissed reports that military operations resulted in civilian deaths, calling them "propaganda." In addition, by imposing the condition that the Houthis clarify the kidnapping of Western aid workers in June, the ROYG is explicitly blaming them for the incident. (Note: Most observers do not believe that the Houthis are responsible for the kidnapping in northern Sa'ada. End Note.)

#### BLOCKADED ROADS AND COMMUNICATIONS BLACKOUT

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16. (C) The ROYG is preventing information from leaving Sa'ada, while the Houthis are keeping essential commercial and military goods from coming into the war-torn governorate.

The Houthis' blockade of the Sana'a-Sa'ada highway has led to acute shortages of flour, diesel, and petrol, while causing the price of fruits and vegetables to plummet since farmers cannot get their crops to markets outside of Sa'ada. According to Mulad, diesel and petrol are available only on the black market, so prices have doubled. Traders are gouging prices of legitimate goods, and the government has ordered rationing. According to Azzan, some families are hiding in the drainage systems under the main roads. The ROYG's decision to block all mobile telecommunications in Sa'ada means that information regarding the situation on the ground will be even harder to obtain. The humanitarian situation is dire, but neither the ROYG nor the Houthis have accurate estimates of casualties and fatalities due to the renewed fighting. (Note: Azzan reported that, since aerial strikes began on August 11, dead bodies lay in the streets for up to three days, an assertion we have been unable to confirm. End Note.)

17. (C) According to media reports, Sa'ada Governor Hassan Manna claimed that 17,000 families have been displaced by the recent fighting. International aid organizations have been unable to provide estimates because of obstacles to access in Sa'ada and a lack of information coming out of the governorate in recent days. Mulad estimates that 4,000 families have been displaced by the new fighting, in addition to the 70,000 people who were displaced by previous rounds of fighting and have not been able to return home. (Note: Although the 70,000 figure is much higher than the estimate of 10,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) cited in reftel, Islamic Relief claims to be providing assistance to 70,000 registered IDPs. End Note.) Pratibha Mehta, UNDP Representative in Yemen, said that people are fleeing in several directions, including Hajja and al-Jawf governorates. She mentioned a new IDP camp in Herad (Hajja governorate) that registered 250 families on its first day, 186 of whom were newly displaced.

18. (C) The greatest challenge facing relief organizations is access to IDPs within Sa'ada governorate. Mulad told PolOff on August 17 that Manna ordered aid agencies not to give aid to IDPs. He said that Islamic Relief has not been able to provide any aid to IDPs for the past week, not due to any food shortages -- the UN World Food Program has large stocks in Sa'ada and local farmers have fruits and vegetables to sell -- but because the government is afraid that IDPs will

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flood the city in greater numbers and perhaps allow Houthis to enter undetected amongst them. Mulad reported that the local government instructed the management of an IDP camp north of Sa'ada City not to accept any more IDPs, and 70 families were stranded just outside it. However, Mehta insists that "nobody is prohibiting" agencies from providing assistance; it is the conflict itself that makes access difficult. She told PolOff on August 17 that "There are a couple of camps near Sa'ada City that we are having trouble accessing, because it's quite likely that's where the action is." Mehta met with Local Administration Minister Rashad al-Alimi on August 15 to discuss how to overcome difficulties in providing humanitarian aid. She reported that Alimi welcomed humanitarian aid to the region. She said he convened a meeting with ROYG officials on August 16 to discuss options for improving access for aid agencies, and is waiting to learn the outcome.

NO NON-MILITARY SOLUTION IN SIGHT  
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19. (C) Mulad told PolOff on August 17 that the government's approach to the conflict is "full (military) force. It will try as hard as possible to put a military end to the conflict." He added, "I don't believe the government wants to find a real solution to the issue." Azzan said that the ROYG is going to gamble that if it strikes the Houthis hard enough, showing them its full strength and capabilities, then

the Houthis will pull back and "the people will disclaim them and blame them" for incurring the ROYG's wrath. The only non-military solution Azzan could foresee was a joint effort by the ROYG, opposition, and media to convince the Houthis to lay down their arms in return for being granted those of their demands that are "rightful, legal, and constitutional."

Azzan does not believe this is likely to happen, however, because "the government is not listening to sound advice. President Saleh only listens to military reports" that are often fabricated to justify the military's failures on the battlefield. Even if a military solution were to be successful in the short-term, Azzan has serious concerns about the aftermath. He told PolOff, "I fear that if the military is victorious, the soldiers will loot, pillage, and rape" in Houthi territory out of greed or revenge.

COMMENT

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[¶10](#). (S) The now-definitive sixth round of the Sa'ada conflict appears even more unlikely to end quickly. After hopes for a ceasefire were dashed with fierce clashes in Sa'ada and Amran governorates on August 15, the two sides have continued to dig in. In the immediate term, international donor community pressure on the ROYG to allow relief agencies to provide aid to IDPs will help alleviate widespread civilian suffering. However, entreaties to explore comprehensive solutions to the conflict are likely to fall on deaf ears given Saleh's unwillingness to listen to anyone outside his shrinking circle of advisors.

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